

sculpture

November 2008
Vol. 27 No. 9

International Sculpture Center
www.sculpture.org



Alyson Shotz Richard Serra Women and Land Art



RICHARD DEACON

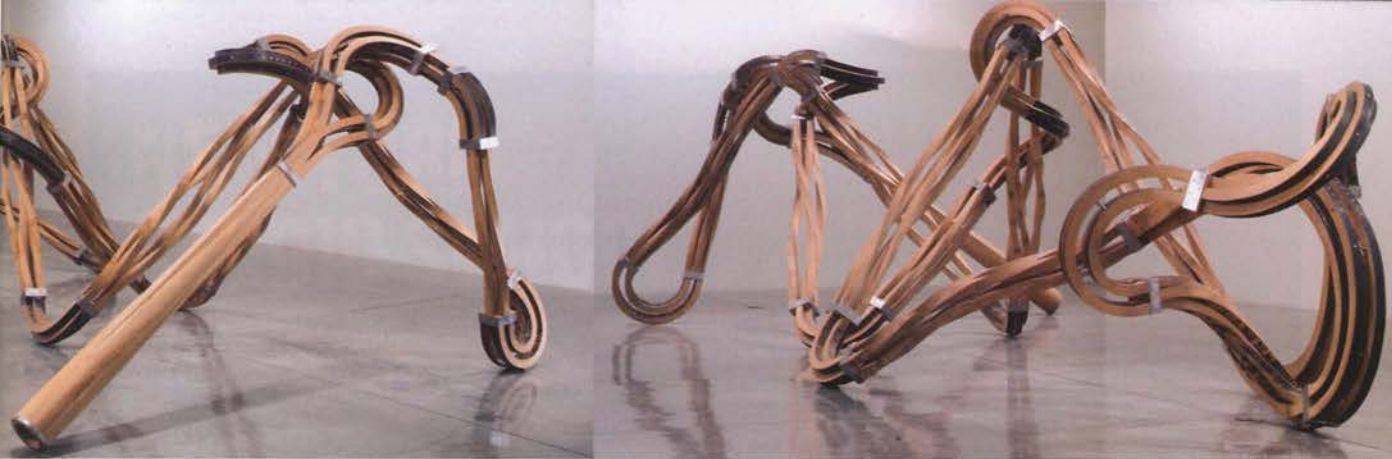
Beyond Explanation

BY JOHN O'BRIEN

Last winter at L.A. Louver, Richard Deacon, in association with Matthew Perry, premiered *Dead Leg* (2007), a new large-scale sculpture composed of twisting, elongated sections of oak and custom-fabricated, stainless steel couplings, and the work later traveled to the Portland Art Museum. At eight feet high and 28 feet long, the work displays a marvelously deft spatial gyration and superb material transmutation. In characteristic Deacon style, *Dead Leg* combines diverse materials into an abstract, airy composition in which fluidity and grace belie the difficult technical processes behind their fluency. During a multi-year forming process, vapor-softened wood is inserted into unique jigs and then incrementally coaxed into diverse forms. The time-consuming labor that keeps the wood from splintering or shattering on release is documented in a rather beautiful set of time-lapse photos and a QuickTime movie <www.lalouver.com>. The resulting work consists of twisted and bent lengths of two-by-twos bound together in groups of four or two, the form regulated by metal splints and nodes that govern the aggregation and directional flow of the assembled oak stock.

Dead Leg's ribbons of lightly colored wood seem to float through space, gathering in geometric knots and spinning into wonderfully harmonious, though unpredictable, curves. Individual components flex and expand, moving away from one another in some sections, clustering and twisting more tightly together in others. Themes may emerge in the viewer's imagination—tension between the organic and the hand-wrought, for instance, or the struggle between the liberated and the constrained—but ultimately the strength of this powerful and dynamic sculpture lies in how it escapes univocal definitions. A complex three-dimensional drawing in space, its fascination remains largely unspeakable and inexplicable in language.

The fascination underlying Deacon's sculptural maps of the topsy-turvy stems from his capacity to surprise—getting a sculpture in the round to go from one distinct thing to another—and from his ability to deflect easy categorization. An overview of his sculptures and installations reveals a series of near-impossible-to-describe physical movements, formal combinations, and spatial manipulations. From the start of his production, his forms have consistently defied language in ways both productive of meaning in a pre-verbal way and resistant to the truncated modes of definition used by spoken and written language. Deacon's titles, in fact, offer an interesting study in linguistic tension. These witty acts of



Above: Three views of *Dead Leg*, 2007. Oak and stainless steel, 8 x 28 x 9 ft. Below: *Nothing is forbidden*, 1994. Wood, glue, and steel staples, 94 x 114 x 37 in.

disassembling leave the viewer with more quandaries than certitudes about the artist's intentions. *Dead Leg* may reference a peg leg (one of its extremities looks like a flared-out peg), or it might conjure an injured or prosthetic limb (strips of oak as muscles), or it might be the dead peg used in sailing to tie off: in fact, it is stuck between meaning all these things and none of them. In an elaborate and well-studied effort to track how Deacon uses titles to underline the complexity and ultimate ineffability of experiencing his sculpture, Jon Thompson (pp. 73–74 in the 1995 Phaidon Press monograph on Deacon's work), compiled an insightful, playful, and philosophically acute taxonomic list without making any headway. Thwarting univocal meaning is where Deacon's sculpture gets interesting.

"Making sense" of something is an odd phrase that we normally use to mean ferreting out meaning or giving significance. Deacon's work challenges the viewer to "make sense of it" without the usual set of tools. Kinesthetic awareness is one of the keys to comprehending the work. It is as hard to describe how our innate understanding of gravity affects our equilibrium as it is easy to feel its effects. It is hard to explain why *Dead Leg*, *Body of Thought No. 2* (1988), and *Blind, Deaf and Dumb A* (1985) make us feel the excitement of a roller coaster, but harder still not to acknowledge the sensation. This twist, that spin, the irrevocable clarity that just that knot there is the best stopping point: these are obvious and yet below the surface of words. Jest or physical surprise might be considered as another mode to use in following Deacon's work. As viewers approach a sculpture like *Nothing is forbidden*, nothing cues them to the possibility that the underside (or perhaps



the back side) folds in on itself. The tortoise-shell-like quality of the most visible surface becomes the honeycomb pattern of industrial production, and the edges take on a secret life as an organic sheaves of raw material sediment.

Little signs of wear and tear appear in many of Deacon's sculptures. These blemishes inform the viewer of the artist's handiwork, without posing as nostalgic reminders of yesteryear. They are simply the after-effects of the working process. The small clots of dots that appear on *Dead Leg* are undoubtedly clamp marks left after the work was bundled and spun into shape. Clustered tightly or in loose groups, the indentations almost appear planned. Subliminally they act as a kind of passport for accepting the dexterity of the material manipulations. We understand that human will, not natural occurrence, created these forms. Deacon wrestles with his materials blithely (assisted quite ably by Perry and others), but he wants the viewer to understand the application of force that caused these transformations. While he is without heroic pretense, he clearly believes in the value and power of work and workmanship.

Deacon offers us a respite from the hustle and bustle of everyday meaning and does so with a beguilingly direct and physical naturalness. As in dance, the luxury of pausing and observing movement without normal constraints brings with it a moment of heightened awareness. At the center of the frozen movement, we find pleasure—we discover specific feeling without needing to give it a name. Our imagination is put to work and labors languidly, beyond the habitual need for explanations.

John O'Brien is a writer living in California.